DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Elizabeth I. Dow
(In memory of Professor Tadasu (Todd) Imahori)

As someone with a background in intercultural communication who became an English language instructor upon my arrival in Japan many years ago, I have grown aware of the gap between the fields of intercultural communication and language teaching. I noticed, as Fantini (1997) aptly states, "interculturalists often overlook (or leave to language teachers) the task of developing language competence, just as language teachers overlook (or leave to interculturalists) the task of developing intercultural abilities" (p. 4). Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing awareness, from both fields, of a common goal—building intercultural communication competency. From both the language teaching side (Byram (1997) and Corbett (2003), in particular) and the intercultural side (Damen (1987) and Fantini (1997), among others) suggestions have been made on how to integrate cultural learning into the second or foreign language classroom in order to develop competency in intercultural communication. Despite these efforts, there are still relatively few resources to aid the language teacher in carrying out the classroom objective of developing intercultural communication competency.

The purpose of this paper is to provide background information and guidance for language teachers who are interested in developing students' intercultural communication competency in the language classroom. First, the concept of intercultural communication competency will be examined from the viewpoints of both interculturalists and language teachers. Second, a suggested approach to developing intercultural communication competency utilizing an experiential learning method will be presented.

The Gap

While language educators and interculturalists are both concerned with facilitating successful communication between people of different cultural backgrounds, they have generally differed in their teaching and training objectives. This is apparent when looking at how both fields have treated culture and language learning over the past half century.

The relatively young field of intercultural communication grew out of a need to better train international sojourners in the post World War II era, which was a time of increased international travel for business, religious purposes, and developmental assistance. In response to an awareness that most U.S. diplomats up until that point in time had been woefully incompetent in the language of the country to where they were dispatched, the U.S. government established the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in 1946 to better train diplomats for their overseas assignments. The FSI hired Edward T. Hall and other prominent anthropologists and linguists to develop pre-departure orientations. While language instruction was an important part of the training, equal if not greater emphasis was placed on understanding cultural patterns of interaction, especially communication style and aspects of nonverbal communication. The theories developed for the FSI later found their way into the communication departments of U.S. universities, with Edward T. Hall's (1959) book *The Silent Language*, a cultural exploration of the nonverbal communication elements of time and space, being a must read for communication studies students. Thus, the field of intercultural communication studies began by emphasizing the need for developing awareness of cultural influences on interaction, as opposed to language ability per se, and this emphasis continued in the years to follow.

Learning culture hand-in-hand with language has been a topic area taken up by language educators over the last half century (Brooks, 1975; Nostrand, 1966; Morain, 1986, among others) and some professional associations have made efforts to establish standards for the learning of culture in the language classroom (e.g. National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1996) *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*). However, due to the challenges of *how* to teach the cultural

element within a language curriculum, culture learning has often fallen to the wayside. As Stern (1992) questions, how does a language teacher articulate and approach the vast concept of "culture"? How does an educator articulate learning objectives for culture? And then, how does one integrate those objectives into a predominantly language-oriented classroom?

The relatively recent emphasis on developing communicative competency in language learning, which focuses on face-to-face communication, has been viewed as an approach which could better accommodate culture learning. However, according to Corbett (2003), in communicative competency theory, communicative ability is considered to be a cultural-general skill which assumes "that by bridging a series of gaps, learners will 'naturally' develop their linguistic knowledge and skills, ultimately to the point where they will acquire native-speaker competence" (p.1). In such practices, English in particular, has come to be seen as a means of communicating which need not be bound to culturally specific conditions and should be easily transferable to any cultural setting. Even in a "general" communicative language curriculum, cultural competence has generally been considered as knowledge about the "life and institutions" of the target culture (Corbet, 2003, p. 31), as opposed to understanding aspects of a culture which may influence a given face-to-face interaction, such as communication style (e.g. high and low context communication; direct and indirect communication) and nonverbal communication (e.g. use of personal space; use of touch; eye contact).

It is due to these challenges that language-teaching specialists such as Michael Byram (1997) and John Corbett (2003) have been moving towards an "intercultural approach" to second/foreign language. Such an approach emphasizes the development of intercultural communication competency in the language classroom and this will be explored in the sections to follow.

A Common Goal: Intercultural Communication Competency

One reason why language educators have taken interest in an "intercultural approach" is because of the perceived weakness of the native speaker model of competency, often held up as the "ideal" outcome for language learners. Byram argues, "the native speaker model seeks the wrong kind of competency, asking the language learner to be linguistically schizophrenic, abandoning one language in order to blend into another linguistic environment…." (1997, p. 11). He adds that the more desirable outcome is a learner:

> with the ability to see and manage the relationships between themselves and their own cultural beliefs, behaviors and meanings, as expressed in a foreign language, and those of their interlocutors, expressed in the same language-or even a combination of languages—which may be the interlocutors' native language or not (p. 12).

Corbett (2003) views intercultural communication competency as including:

> the ability to understand the language and behaviour of the target community, and explain it to members of the 'home' community– and vice versa. In other words, an intercultural approach trains learners to be 'diplomats', able to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding (p. 2).

With these goals in mind, an intercultural approach encourages a movement away from teaching solely cultural "tidbits" or other facts towards the acquisition of a "complex combination of valuable knowledge and skills needed to mediate between cultures" (Corbett, p. 31).

As language teachers use intercultural communication concepts to raise competency in the language classroom, interculturalists are also further acknowledging the obvious role language plays in intercultural communication competency. While a major distinction has often been made in the intercultural field that language proficiency and communication competency are not one in the same — being fluent in the host language does not guarantee successful communication with native speakers of that language (see for example, M. J. Bennett's

(1993) article "How not to be a fluent fool") — the role of language proficiency as a critical ability in gaining cultural knowledge and forming relationships in the host culture is not being overlooked. As Smith, Paige and Steglitz (2003) stress, language proficiency is key to both successful relationship formation and cultural adjustment, which are both indicators of intercultural communication competency. Furthermore, learning a second or third language offers insights into other cultures and expands our "communication repertoire," thus enhancing intercultural competency (Martin and Nakayama, 1997, p. 475).

Conceptualizing Intercultural Communication Competency

With the common goal of intercultural communication competency (ICC), it is helpful to understand more specifically conceptualizations of ICC and how they have evolved. Its articulation first emerged in the field of intercultural communication out of anecdotal evidence about "what went wrong" among individuals living and working overseas (Smith Paige and Steglitz, 2003). Initially, therefore, ICC theory was developed to solve practical problems relating to ineffective intercultural communication. In this effort to pinpoint the "ideal intercultural communicator" rose four basic components: (1) *motivation*, (2) *knowledge* of self and other cultures, (3) *attitudes* such as tolerance for ambiguity, empathy and nonjudgementalism, and (4) *behaviors/skills* including displays of respect and interaction management (Wiseman, 2002). Over the past few decades, listings of these four components and their accompanying qualities have accumulated, with variations according to the researcher, each trying to capture the essential characteristics that make up an effective intercultural communicator.

As ideas on the nature of intercultural communication competency have been put forth over the years, so have questions about measuring competency given differing cultural standards for what constitutes communication competency in a given cultural context (Spitzberg, 1989: Wiseman & Abe, 1994). While many interculturalists can agree on the importance of culture-general communication behaviors such as empathy,

respect, and nonjudgementalism, the way these behaviors are expressed and interpreted may vary substantially from one culture (or subculture) to another. Given the problematic nature of what constitutes competency cross-culturally, some researchers have argued for the need to move away from the trait approach to a more process-oriented approach emphasizing *quality of interaction performance* (Collier, 1988; Imahori and Lanigan, 1989; Spitzberg, 1989).

Imahori and Lanigan (1989) emphasize this process-oriented approach in their *relational* model of ICC. Although it has the four common components listed above (motivation, knowledge, attitudes and skills), these dimensions are contingent on the goals and personal, social and cultural experiences of the interlocutors in determining the relational outcome of the intercultural interaction. They posit that effective relational outcome (satisfaction/effectiveness) can only occur when a degree of congruence has been achieved between two communicators' competence assumptions and behaviors. Because these issues are *relationally* defined and negotiated, just how much congruence is necessary, is highly variable and depends on the nature of the relationship. Imahori and Lanigan (1989) have therefore moved beyond the idea that competence involves the "unilateral cultural adaptation of the sojourner to the host" (as cited in Smith, Paige & Steglitz, 2003, p. 275) and suggests that a "highly competent sojourner not only adapts his/her behavior to the host nationals but also helps the host nationals adjust to his or her behavior" (p. 274). Successful interactions result in competent intercultural relationships, that is, ones that are mutually satisfying to both partners.

It is also very important not to leave out the theory of cultural identity when considering ICC. As first articulated by Collier and Thomas (1988), identities are created through communication and cultural identities form when one identifies with a particular social group. Additionally, people have multiple cultural identities (for example, national, ethnic, regional, and age) which become salient in a given interaction based on a number of factors, such as context, language, age, and gender. Intercultural communication competency in this perspective occurs when the two interlocutors find that the cultural identities avowed

and ascribed are in sync and are mutually satisfying. While not all interactions need to be "competent," (as incompetent interactions lead to behavioral change which then strengthens the relationship), competent interactions tend to develop a sense for appropriate interaction posture.

Language Learners as *Intercultural Speakers*

As mentioned earlier, in the field of language education, scholars are giving greater attention to *how* culture is being taught in the language classroom. Claire Kramsch (2003), while praising the attention given to culture in the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project's *Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21st century* (1996), points out the challenges in teaching "cultural competence." She argues that cultural competency cannot be taught and then tested through traditional methods (i.e. testing facts about culture). Therefore such standards face the challenge of teaching and assessing what she sees as the essential element of competency: the symbolic link between language and culture, i.e., the use of language in discourse as *enacting* social roles and *representing* cultural perceptions and misperceptions. More specifically, she views the teaching of culture as a dialogic process of coming to terms with the often complex encounter between two or more cultures.

In conceptualizing competency, Kramsch (2003) advocates for a "third perspective" where learners can take both an insider's and outsider's view on native culture C1 and target culture C2. This is a sort of vantage point from where learners can view both the home and target culture and navigate between differing perspectives. This kind of "intercultural speaker" moves easily between discourse communities, switching to the language and communication style needed in a given context.

Like Kramsch, Michael Byram (1989, 1997, 2003), who has written specifically and extensively on intercultural competency in the foreign language classroom, advocates the "intercultural speaker" as ideal. This idea challenges the notion that "the native speaker is always right" and

that intercultural interactions involves one native speaker and a learner who is trying to achieve fluency in his or he interlocutor's language. Rather, it is more effective to judge interactions not only in terms of successful information exchange, "but also in terms of the establishing and maintenance of human relationships" (1997, p. 32).

Becoming an "intercultural speaker" involves what Byram calls the "five saviors" or five categories of knowledge and skills needed to mediate between cultures. He developed them mainly from a base in existing FLT theory, and has thus far produced one of the most fully worked-out specification of intercultural competence for language educators:

- Attitudes: relativising self and valuing others
- Knowledge: of self and other; of interaction, both individual and societal
- Skills of interpreting and relating: being able to interpret and relate information
- Skills of discovery and interaction: being able to discover information and use it in interaction
- Education: political education, critical cultural awareness (adapted from Byram, 1997)

Byram's conceptualizations for the intercultural speaker parallel the knowledge, attitudes and skills covered earlier in ICC theory. Byram, among with many of the other educators referred to above, stress that language educators should not be concerned with providing representations of other cultures, but should focus on providing learners with the means of accessing and analyzing the cultural practices and meanings they encounter.

Learning Objectives and Teaching Methods

With the above conceptualizations of intercultural communication competency in mind, how might one form learning objectives for the language classroom? Then, what kind of learning method would best achieve these objectives? The objectives and methods described below

are based on the conceptualizations of ICC theory covered thus far, and seek to develop what Kramsch (2003) and Byram (1997) describe as the "intercultural speaker." Further, they seek to help learners "learn how to learn" about culture and effective intercultural communication and are framed within the relational model advocated by Imahori and Lanigan (1989) above.

Objectives

Motivation

- To help students become more curious about other cultures and motivated to communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds

Motivation is often considered to be the most important dimension of communication competency. "If we aren't motivated to communicate with others, it probably doesn't matter what other skills we possess" (Martin and Nakayama, 1997, p. 471).

Knowledge

- To develop knowledge of the target language

This objective is an obvious one for any language classroom. The teacher can stress how learning the language is a window into that culture. Language learning provides students with a greater range of communicative ability and another perspective for viewing the world.

- To develop greater knowledge of the target culture, including variation in verbal and nonverbal communication; cultural values, beliefs and attitudes; and cultural practices

In order to avoid stereotyping and essentializing culture, it is important for teachers to present such information as a range of behaviors and thought occurring across a given culture in varying contexts.

- To develop self-knowledge, including awareness of one's own assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs; communication style; strengths and weaknesses as a communicator

Attitudes:

- To be open and objective to cultural variations and differences

In developing cultural competency, most interculturalists suggest a non-judgemental stance when exploring cultural differences, while trends in cultural studies advocate a critical perspective concerning issues related to culture/power struggles (such as in Byram's (1997) education category of ICC listed above). As the language class may be the first opportunity for many students to actively explore culture, I believe it is more suitable to introduce the relativist perspective of "one culture is not better than the other, just different" as a starting point. Students who are interested in exploring cultural issues from a critical perspective hopefully can do so in more specialized classes. Bearing this in mind, language teachers need to be aware of their own cultural biases which they may or may not bring into the language classroom.

Skills:

- To be able to interpret behavior, communication and artifacts from another culture, explain them to others and be able to relate them back to one's own culture

This objective connects closely to the "intercultural speaker" idea. It is a communication process that entails "meta-communication" skills where one can "communicate about communication." It provides the "vantage point" Kramsch (2003) advocates for in the "third perspective" and moves away from the goal of native speaker ability.

- To develop the ability to use one's knowledge, attitudes and skills effectively under the constraints of real-time communication with a specific interlocutor

This last objective emphasizes the process oriented and relational nature of ICC. A learner has not achieved competency unless he or she has successful interaction with another who feels a similar sense of success, in other words, the communication is mutually satisfying to both partners. An important part of this success is both interactants feeling that their salient cultural identity has been understood and respected. This ability usually does not occur at a conscious level and can be viewed as what Howell (1982) a renowned intercultural scholar calls "unconscious competence," where one uses knowledge together with experience and intuition to make communication choices that succeed in a given

encounter.

Methods: Experiential Learning

Given that the objectives above call for not only cognitive development, but also attitudinal and behavioral development, and that they require students to take an active part in the learning process, an experiential learning approach is called for. Experiential learning has been widely used in the intercultural communication field for training sojourners and has the central tenet of "one learns best by doing." Gudykunst & Hammer (1983) distinguish between experiential and didactic approaches for culture learning: A didactic approach emphasizes cognitive understanding of a certain culture, such as its customs, history, and politics. The primary methods used are lecture and the memorizing of information, such as cultural differences. An experiential learning approach uses structured activities that are designed to confront the learners with situations that they may encounter in another culture. In general, didactic approaches emphasize cognitive learning and the teacher's role. Experiential learning approaches, on the other hand, emphasize the learner's role and affective learning. Gannon and Poon's 1997 study comparing the effects of didactic and experiential approaches on cultural awareness and trainee reaction, found that both approaches were effective in raising cultural awareness. However, experientially-trained participants "were not only more satisfied with the training, but also perceived it to be more useful and relevant" (p. 441).

Experiential learning in the language classroom, where students may not have had many intercultural encounters as of yet, can be particularly beneficial. Unlike experiencing the "real thing," where psychological blocks and other inhibiting effects of the second culture may come in to hinder the learning process, the classroom can serve as a supportive and facilitative environment for cross-cultural understanding and learning (Brown, 1994). In a sense, the classroom is a substitute for the "real" world where students can practice and or simulate intercultural encounters in a supportive and "safe" environment.

Structuring the experience. As experiential learning emphasizes the

affective element of learning, it is especially important to have a sound structural framework. Based upon the experiential learning structures presented by Kolb (1984); Walter & Marks (1981), and Gudykunst & Hammer (1983), an experiential activity may be structured in the following phases:

1. Introduction
2. Experience
3. Debrief
4. Summary

In the **introduction phase**, it is important to set a supportive tone where there are no right or wrong answers. Ideally, students will have already developed trust in their teacher, so that there can be a classroom atmosphere of openness and risk taking. The activity should be introduced in such a way that the students understand how it is relevant to them. The introduction should be brief, however.

During the **experiencing phase**, participants will react to the situation intellectually, emotionally and behaviorally. Instructors (activity leaders) should be available to answer questions. "The desired condition is for leaders to attend to but not interfere with task activities....Other concentration-facilitating leader behaviors are captured in descriptive terms such as coaching, encouraging and supporting, energizing, and even cheerleading in addition to basic responsiveness and attending" (Walter & Marks, 1981, pp. 164-165).

The **debriefing phase** is where participants and the leader discuss the experience, giving necessary details, order and meaning to the participants' experience. It involves participants and the leader providing needed information and details as well as participants sharing their reactions to the experience (Walter & Marks, 1981, p. 166). The debriefing phase should not be rushed through, as it is an essential phase which allows the students to process the experience.

In the **summary phase**, the "primary task is to assist participants in increasing their storage and recall of the learning achieved in the preceding phases and in developing cognitive structures for organizing and giving meaning to the experience" (Walter & Marks, 1981, p. 168). Here the leader plays more of an active role in trying to bring

the whole activity together, making this phase appear similar to a lecture; but it differs, according to Walters and Marks, in the following way: "experiential leaders also share their feelings and reactions with participants, and any lecture material should be linked closely to participant experiences. Further, brevity is desirable since the experience has already provided the explanation" (p. 169). Specifically, the leader should help give perspective to the experience by providing information most central to the learning objectives, including any related theory or research. Here the leader can also generalize the learning and explore how it can be applied to other situations. With regards to culture learning, this summary phase could include the following points provided by Gudykunst and Hammer (1983):

1. Identify and analyze cross-cultural differences in values, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors
2. Examine participants' intellectual, emotional, and behavioral reactions to the situations presented in the structured activities
3. Examine the influence that participants' own culturally learned beliefs, values, and assumptions had on their reactions to the situations or problems as presented

Experiential learning activities. Structured experiential activities have generally included the following: simulations, role playing, case studies, critical incidents, questionnaires or self-assessment inventories, presentation of audio-visual material, and field-experience. Please refer to the list of recommended resources found at the end of this article for experiential culture learning activities.

Notes to the Teacher

It is certainly no easy task to take on objectives for developing intercultural communication competency in addition to those of language learning. Teachers themselves need to feel knowledgeable and indeed comfortable in approaching and facilitating such learning. Recently, there are several good textbooks that provide both explanations on culture

and activities for culture learning and awareness (see Recommended Resources at the end of this paper).

Louise Damen (2003) presents some helpful as well as useful "lessons" for the language teacher who wants to introduce culture learning in his or her classroom (a number of these points echo what has been presented earlier in this article):

(1) Cultural learning should be experiential episodes in a non-threatening environment.
(2) Culture learning should be seen as a process and included as an ongoing element in the language classroom.
(3) Culture learning should go beyond the verbal code, including nonverbal communication.
(4) Culture learning should emphasize that traits of the target or foreign culture may or may not be shared by all members of a given cultural group.
(5) Culture learning is a practicing of skills, so evaluation should not be based solely on comprehending cultural information.
(6) Culture learning has a place for translation as a form of cultural inquiry or interpretation.
(7) In the culture learning classroom, the teacher should provide guidance and support for the students' cultural exploration. The teacher should ideally become a "cultural mentor" and trainer "in the development of sensitivity to cross-cultural differences, of social skills in communicating across cultures, and of personal skills in adapting to the inevitability of change in social and cultural patterns and appropriate behaviors as lifetime pursuits" (p. 84).

A couple of key suggestions made above by Damen deserve a little more attention. As in (1), teachers should assure a non-threatening classroom atmosphere that is supportive and open. This goes hand in hand with making an assessment at the beginning of the class as to where students fall "developmentally" regarding cultural awareness (Bennett, Bennett & Allen, 2003). Talking about cultural differences in values, beliefs and attitudes can feel unsettling to students who are relatively unfamiliar with cultural variation. It is therefore suggested that these

experiential culture learning activities are conducted once a supportive classroom atmosphere has been created, which may be in the latter part of the course.

Regarding 2, it has been emphasized by both interculturalists and language educators interested in ICC that culture learning should be presented as process—a process which takes place not only over the duration of the class, but over the duration of a lifetime. By stressing *learning how to learn*, or a process-oriented pedagogy rather than a product-oriented pedagogy (learning facts) students will be more apt to move toward understanding cultural complexity and individual variation as opposed to cultural stereotypes.

The Intercultural Speaker and the Japanese EFL Learner

Developing the intercultural speaker in the Japanese EFL classroom presents interesting challenges. For many, learning English is one of the first encounters a student may have with a different "culture" and what that student learns in English language classes can be a powerful shaper of expectations about the behavior, values and life-styles of non-Japanese. Given this learning context, it is all the more important that teachers present cultural information and behavior as varied, dynamic and contextual.

Another challenge, especially for the middle school and high school learning context, is the emphasis many English classrooms place on learning English in order to pass entrance examinations for high school and college. With such learning goals in mind, there is much less opportunity to carry out culture learning objectives, never-the-less experiential learning activities. Under such circumstances, educators may find the most opportunity to lead experiential culture learning activities for ICC in the elementary school and university language classrooms, when language teachers have a bit more freedom. Given this learning context, elementary school is an ideal time to try to foster the important objective of raising student motivation towards learning about other languages and cultures. This motivation is what is so strongly needed to

carry students through the later years of language and culture study.

Conclusion

There are a number of topic areas which this paper has not addressed, such as providing practical and concrete examples of integrating experiential learning activities into the language classroom as well as how to assess intercultural communication competency. For the former, it is hoped that the list of recommended resources will be of assistance and for the latter, Michael Byram (1997) has a chapter devoted to assessing intercultural communication competency.

This paper has briefly shown how the gap between language educators and interculturalists is connected by at least one bridge: that built by a common interest in intercultural communication competency. Language learners greatly benefit from developing the motivation, knowledge, attitudes and skills that will enable them to have mutually satisfying intercultural encounters with others. This goal, of becoming an "intercultural speaker," while best achieved through first hand intercultural interaction, can be cultivated in the language classroom through the use of culture learning activities, especially those that are experientially based. Through such activities, it is hoped that students will "learn how to learn" about culture and effective intercultural communication and carry that ability with them throughout their lives. While carrying out culture learning activities in the language classroom still presents ample challenges for teachers, this author hopes that with the growing interest in intercultural communication competency, it will become a standard objective in the language learning curriculum.

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